Russian Short Stories

Roach Hole

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Roach Hole by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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And really, neither I nor anybody else could ever meet, in a lifetime, a fellow queerer, quainter, and, at the same time, more touching. He was a man of small stature, as black as a black cockroach, with an enormous black beard; he was prematurely bald, but his eyes were glowing, beautiful, and somewhat unhealthy.

He was always full of protests, complaints, plans for inventions, letters to newspapers, letters of recommendation for servants, and so forth.

He would burst into our quarters—a students' garret, rented by Goliyashkin—and would suddenly yell, all beside himself:

"It's an outrage! How is it that nobody surmises that candle factories nowadays really represent something in the nature of a swindling American Trust: the stearine is mixed with kerosene! The wicks are saturated through and through with kerosene! It is therefore perfectly evident, even to a two year-old infant, that nowadays candles burn four times as fast as a normal candle should, and that, therefore, I am paying to a syndicate—or how the devil do you call it?—as much for one

candle consumed as I ought to pay for four candles! And everybody knows this, and nobody protests!”

After a lapse of time he would again come running to us, and would shout in horror:

“Oh, yes! Are you resting on your laurels? But have you paid any attention to the fact that the designs on the government banknote—that is, to put it more correctly, on the promissory notes of the government—are changed every year?”

And, hurriedly masticating a piece of bologna, and scalding himself with tea, he continued:

“And then, some Penza muzhik or other, a numskull who is not only illiterate but even worships the pagan gods Valiess and Dazhd-Bog—such a muzhik is caught in a trap! Somewhere in town notices have been posted up to the effect that the bills will be honored until such and such a date only; the matter is spoken of even in churches,” the Roach again scalds himself with the tea, “from the ambo.… But then, a muzhik does not carry his savings to a government bank, but prefers to hide them in a barn, in the horse mangers, or to bury them under the old apple tree. The time comes for him to die. He or his sons exhume the treasure trove out of its hidden place and carry it off to cash it. But an official, in splendid linen, with buttons and shoulder-straps, tells them most calmly: ‘These bills cannot be accepted.’ What are we to see in that? Isn’t it an attempt upon the drawstring purse of the good old fifty-million population?”

Becoming infatuated with this lode, he came to us again four

days later, but very much tired, done up, as though he were giving up his last strength to his call:

"Tell me!" he clamored, "why do they mint such abominable silver coins nowadays?! Those of the reigns of Peter the Great, of Catherine, and even those of Nicholas—Nicholas the First—survive sturdily to this day, and, when one strikes them on the marble slab at an inn, ring true! On the other hand, coins of the present day, even those truly genuine, are rubbed off within a year—both head and tail. And the scoundrelly shopkeeper does not even try them, but simply flings them back at you, saying 'Can't tell what coin that is. All rubbed off. Let's have newer coins!' Same thing with gold. Just recall, my children, how, almost three centuries ago, they wanted to fool the people with just such a little stunt, and how the matter came to the knowledge of the highest authorities, and how the ringleaders in this affair had their mouths filled with molten silver and gold? Eh? Am I not telling the truth, perhaps? And tell me, please, why are the gold pieces of the present day called *metaux d'or*? If you can't understand anything about it, neither can I, I confess! Oh, well, all you know is to neigh like stallions when they feel their oats. Funny, is it?" And he spat in disgust.

And, finishing his tea, which had grown cold by now, he would hurriedly tell us goodbye, extending to each one of us in turn his small, dry, rigid, warm hand, and would run off somewheres into space, like an unidentified splinter from some wandering planet.

However, I once managed, somehow, to visit his lodgings—a rumor that he was seriously ill had reached me, and I found

out where he lived through the government bureau of addresses. I had to travel to the Skolniki, almost at the edge of the world; and, of course, this was in the heart of winter—about Christmas, I think—in the midst of a raging blizzard. With the greatest difficulty I succeeded in finding his room. … However, this was neither a room, nor a mansard, nor even a garret, but something that resembled, rather, a dovecote or a birdhouse for starlings, through the cracks of which the wind tore in freely from the outside. A kitchen table … a wooden tabouret … some felt spread on the floor, and on it, under an old torn fur coat, lies this amazing Black Roach, who is shivering in a fever ague and is delirious at times. He refused the offices of a doctor, as well as the offer of the money which we had somehow managed to scrape together in our bohemian crowd. (It must be said that of all the people I have ever seen the Roach was the proudest and most disinterested one.) It was necessary to send him in a hired cab to a hospital, when he fell into an absolute coma. Of colossal strength must have been the organism of this Black Roach, whom neither the frosts of Moscow, nor the severest form of typhoid, could subdue.

Incidentally, I managed to notice a remarkable thing in this beggarly hole, which was called a separate room from that of the other inmates of the house: on the floor, on the table, and on the window sill there was a vast number of books piled up—some of them exceeding rarities, others in antique bindings of calf and pigskin, with gold inlays. Here were the works of the great Fathers of the Church and the teachers: of Basil the Great, Tertullian, Origen, John of the Golden Lips, the Blessed

Augustine, and others.

Really, the Black Roach absolutely amazed me at every step.

We would lose track of him for a year, for two years, for three years at a time. Many of us had already died during this period, and one even underwent (through a misunderstanding, however) capital punishment, by hanging; but the Roach remained just as he was, and somehow did not even seem changed in appearance. And—what is strangest of all!—his character, which was not of this earth, his passion for exposures, and his civic indignation, which was somehow aimless, not only did not pass away with the years, but, it seemed, kept on constantly increasing. Now he would be carrying Dukhobori into Canada (into Vancouver); then growing asparagus in the mountainous regions on the ridge of Yaila, in Crimea; next he became a regisseur in a fashionable theater. (May the Lord slay me if I can understand what he had to do with the dramatic art!) When decadence became the rage, he bravely started studying painting, and even attained to the exhibition of female nudes, green in color, with violet hair and with wreaths of yellow flowers upon their heads. Later, rumors reached me somehow of his having held a position in a circus as referee in wrestling bouts, and even, I think, as a swallower of burning tow, of salamanders, adders, frogs, and an "Eat-'em-alive!" of cats, under the pseudonym of "Captain Greig, the Man with the Iron and Incombustible Stomach." He was, likewise, a horticulturist, the editor of a yellow sheet, a representative for some rubber manufacturers, a tax comptroller, and a boatswain on a sailing vessel. Now, when

his entire life is a thing of the past, I sometimes, in the periods of insomnia, recall him with tenderness and wonder—where didn't life (and, it may have been, curiosity) toss this man? I have forgotten to say that I knew something of his past. In his early youth he had served in a cavalry guard and had participated with immense success in gentlemanly races and steeple chases. Neither fears nor complicating difficulties existed for him: he could take any obstacle on any horse, as easy as cracking a nut. True, like every daring horseman, he had frequent spills. Almost all the parts of his arms and legs had been broken and had grown together again clumsily. As for his exit from the regiment, that was due to some absurd incident, in which, however, supersensitive corps d'esprit was far more at fault than he.

Frequently he disappeared from our midst, as though he had been swallowed up by the ocean. Nevertheless, fate inevitably threw us together.

The Russo-Japanese War burst into a blaze. And so I was simply convinced that he would prove to be there, "in the war zone." And I was not mistaken. In one of the relayed dispatches I unexpectedly read that Captain of the Cavalry So-and-so, retired, had distinguished himself by his amazing valor at such-and-such a retreat, and had been awarded the Order of St. Vladimir of the Third Rank (with swords). This man interested me to such a degree—or, rather, had grown so close to my heart—that I, with absolute composure, even though not without a certain secret curiosity, waited to see how he would end.

When the war quieted down, the Roach came back to Russia with two Crosses of St. George and with a black bandage over his left eye.

“It’s abominable! It’s outrageous!” he stormed—the same native of the shores of the Black Sea that he had always been, but by now already markedly gray. “They’ve sold the fatherland, the worthless scoundrels! They made hay while the sun shone! Deserted their positions, in order to lodge complaints! Kept up harems! Oh, if they’d only let me lay my hands on these skunks! …”

And right here came the Ninth of January, the Seventeenth of October, Gapon, Schmidt, and, in general, the whole Russian muddle of the first revolution. Of course he, like an imp or chimney-sweep jack-in-the-box, had to show his mettle even here. He made speeches somewhere, which no one understood—and really, did he understand anything in them himself? Still, he was borne in the arms of the crowds, tossed aloft, and kissed.

But, in the meanwhile, the times were changing with unusual rapidity, and the destinies of the empire with them. Our little society of students was dispersed, every man going his own way. Some died, others became celebrities, fashionable physicians, or well-known lawyers; but for some reason this man, this Black Roach so dear to me, was decreed by fate always to encounter me.

“It’s an outrage!” he clamored, bursting into my rooms like a bomb. “A system of stool-pigeons! Stool-pigeons everywhere! A huge system! Men have lost all shame, fear, and conscience!

Why, can one be sure that when a man is carrying a bomb in his hand he has not received four months' salary for doing it? I can't bear it any more! I shall expose these worthless scoundrels!"

It was amazing! Neither age, nor the wounds he had received in the war, nor fatigue from the intense life he had led, seemed to have any effect upon him. Every step in the life of Russia as a society was reflected in him as in a mirror—but some sort of a droll mirror, such as are found in dime musees and panopticums, in which a man expands in finitely in breadth, or else suddenly increases in height and becomes as thin as a tapeworm.

And now a comparatively quiet time comes along. The Russian Parliament opens, and my Black Roach dashes off at a mad pace into some province or other, obtains dubious funds somewhere and buys the land necessary to secure an electorate, and exactly one year later, sitting in the galleries of the Tabriz Palace, I hear him delivering a thundering speech—in any case, one not meant for the benefit of the government. I confess that, owing to the memories of my youth, I had preserved a sort of apprehensive tenderness toward him; and, as I listened to him, I feared all the time to see soldiers and jailers enter at any second and put handcuffs and leg-irons upon him, and take him away into tiny, narrow government quarters.

"The waves still mutter the same old thing. … Statute One-hundred-and-twenty still mutters the same old thing. … The many-headed tail of the old regime, having entwined with its sting well nigh one third of the terrestrial globe …"

Here the chairman stopped him and ordered him out of the room. He was muttering something else in the doorway, but I could no longer distinguish anything of what he was saying.

I had almost given up hope of meeting him after this scandal; but you can imagine my astonishment at meeting him both the next year, and the year after that—in short, during all the sessions of Parliament in the self same Tabriz Palace. With horror and with pity I watched this harebrained and irrepressible man fade more and more with every year. Subsequently he changed from the S.R.'s (Social Revolutionaries) to the Laborites; thence he dived into the ranks of the conservative Cadets; and, finally, sunk until he touched the Octobrists. Frequently of evenings, when I would be alone, I pondered on the destiny of this amazing fellow. "What drew him toward all these strange—let us say—changes of views? Can it be," thought I, "an echo of the peculiarly Russo-Tartarian restlessness and wanderlust? Or is it simply lack of steadfastness in spirit, so deeply inherent in the nature of our splendid nation?" And immediately I would contradict myself, saying that this man was sober, continent, a vegetarian, and a nonsmoker. … But at the same time I could not admit that he was mad.

And then, a few months later, the Balkan War begins—probably the cruelest war of all those that have been fought in this world. With huge amazement I read in the papers that my friend is Little-Johnny-on-the-spot; the Black Roach is now in the ranks of the Bulgarian troops.

Thereupon I begin to be interested in his destiny. Through

certain friends I contrive to telegraph inquiries about him. But no! The waters seem to have swallowed him up, as the saying is. “Must have reached the end of his game,” thought I; “probably he is lying in some ditch or hollow, crushed under scores of corpses; or, perhaps, he is asprawl in some field, with his ears and nose cut off, with his eyes gouged out—or has he, perhaps, been turned into corruption and dust long since?”

I must confess that a genuine, sincere regret possessed me.

But life runs on and on, and to make it pause is a difficult matter. … And the troubles of the day make everything in the world to be lightly forgotten. And I almost forgot about the friend of my youth—and then suddenly I received a curious postal card from Athos. Some monastery was depicted upon the side of it, with white buildings, surrounded by green trees; upon the other was the address—in an obviously tremulous handwriting; and right near the address, to the left, a few lines were tacked on, written in the same jumpy handwriting. At the beginning of these lines stood a funerary cross, done in ink:

Four triangles arranged so that their points meet in the middle.

and then the following words:

“Tomorrow I am invested with the Great Schema, and take a vow of silence. I bless you and everybody else, and always remember all of you in my ardent prayers. I pray God that He may send contrition, love, and compassion into all your hearts as well. This is the last letter that I shall write as long as I live—tomorrow I shall be dead for the world forever. My library is still there, at the Sokolniki, with the landlady; take it, and, I

beg of you, distribute the books among all those who remember me. And may the mercy of God be over you.

“The lowly monk of the schema,

Agathangel.”

Well, what was to be done? The thing was over with. I wept over this bit of tidings, come from God knows what land. And what touched me was not so much the fate of my friend, as the fate of the entire turbulent Russian people, ever seeking something, it knows not what. And truly! Was he not the most faithful, the most typical representative of it? I pictured him to myself—the erstwhile *bretteur* and horseman—sitting in a cell, sustaining himself with a single red cross bun a day, sleeping in a coffin of cypress wood, which he had made with his own hands, and, most terrible of all, keeping silent—he! the indefatigable, the irrepressible!